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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000322

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2-24-13

TAGS: PREL PTER PGOV PHUM CE LTTE

SUBJECT: Prime Minister address on status of peace process, most observers see statement as positive

Refs: Colombo 274 and previous

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe used the February 22 one year anniversary of the formal ceasefire to comment on the status of the peace process and his vision of what is to come. Most observers viewed his speech with appreciation. The only detractors were those who were to be expected. Of particular interest, however, is how little note the Sri Lankan population seems to have taken of the speech. End Summary.

The Speech

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¶2. (U) On February 22 Sri Lanka celebrated one year of an official ceasefire between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). (Note: The GSL and LTTE announced unilateral ceasefires fourteen months ago on December 24, 2001.) Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe used the occasion to address the nation on the status of the peace process and to outline where he sees the process going. He stressed that the nation is behind the peace process and that those opposed are in the minority. He also commented on President Kumaratunga's having initiated many of the policies permitting the government to go the route of a negotiated settlement.

¶3. (U) He acknowledged that the LTTE had violated the terms of the ceasefire agreement, but that some parts of society were exaggerating the scope of the violations. He also stressed that the international community is playing a role in applying pressure on the LTTE to make sure that it complies with international standards human rights and democratic standards. He argued that in the end the LTTE will be a political party that must respond to its people, but to get there they have to be taken into the mainstream. He further argued that there would be difficulties, and that he would welcome any recommendations from the opposition on how to overcome them.

Reactions

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¶4. (C) Within the Tamil community the response to the speech was generally positive, but the focus remained on the alleged failures of the government to help return the north and east to a status of normalcy. When asked about Wickremesinghe's speech, Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam, a Tamil National Alliance MP, quickly changed the topic to the government's security zones in Jaffna. He then recited the oft-repeated argument that the military occupation of vast tracks of land is preventing the resettlement of IDP's (see Refs).

¶5. (C) Fulfilling expectations, Waruna Rajapakse, a provincial councilor for the Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) criticized the speech as a "waste of time." He went on to accuse the government of selling out the nation to the LTTE.

¶6. (C) The views of Jehan Perera, the director of the National Peace Council, a well-regarded local think tank, were more in line with the overall response to the Prime Minister's speech. He commented that Wickremesinghe gave a "very good overview" and was "very impressive." Perera also stressed that it was a positive that the PM was taking the people "into his confidence."

Comment

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¶7. (C) Despite continued tensions in the north and east, as detailed in Reftels, and promises by the JVP to stage massive protests against the ongoing peace process one of the more noteworthy aspects of the Prime Minister's speech was how little note it received. While the LTTE

was staging peace related protests in the north and east over the weekend, the population in the south, both Tamil and Sinhalese, appear to have adopted a complacency towards the current peace process, at least for now. End Comment.

WILLS